DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 116 CS 503 604

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TITLE Eliminating Sexism from Children's Theatre Productions.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (Dallas, TX, August 9-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; *Childhood Attitudes; Guidelines; *Sex Bias; *Sex Fairness; Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Speech Communication; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Directors (Theater)

ABSTRACT

To help reduce sexism in children's theatre productions, directors should make a conscious effort to eliminate negative patterns from scripts. They should give attention to the roles of the characters, since female characters are often relegated to the roles of waiting for a male, a supportive parent or sister, or a passive admirer of a male. Character traits also should be carefully examined and broken down into categories. While it is possible for a director to add positive physical actions for the female characters without altering the tone of the play, it is the actions set out by the plot of the play that are often sexist. Sexist dialogue also can be changed without altering the play to any extent. Directors and actors must guard against asking for a "little girl" or a "little boy" in the audience to participate in the production when what they really need is a child. The entire process of creating a nonsexist children's theatre production is complex and requires a determined group effort. However, if the director does not have a nonsexist production as a final goal, there is only a slim chance that the production will be free of sex bias. (HOD)

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Eliminating Sexism From Children's Theatre Productions

If we believe as Moses Goldberg, that "children's theatre is a theatre where no distinction is made on the basis of economic class, race, sex, religion, or national origin,"[1] then we owe our audiences a season of productions, each of which is non-racist, non-sexist and non-biased as to class or national origin. This paper deals specifically with the elimination of sexism in children's theatre productions, however, many if not most of the suggestions offered could easily be applied towards the elimination of the other areas of prejudice.

It is most important that we make a conscious effort to eliminate sexism in children's theatre.* For many years there has been a growing awareness of the need for reform in children's literature, picture-books, and school readers. In 1951 a workshop on the psychological aspects of the child audience in films and television set up a list of ten criteria to assist producers, writers and directors in the creation of good quality productions. While none of the ten criteria refer to sexism specifically, they are an attempt to set some guidelines, which are in fact, good

* In 1977 the American Library Association began a re-evaluation project of all works that have appeared on their lists of Notable Books from 1940-1970, which specifically considers sexism and racism.[2]

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common sense. The sixth criteria states: "Is the plot reasonably realistic?"[3] Campton Bell, in her article "The Psychology of the Child Audience" (1952) comments on this criteria and relates it specifically to children's theatre as follows:

> Though he sic likes new experiences, they must be enough like his sic own to permit him sic to understand and to become a part of the story. In addition, when he sic imitates the hero he sic should be imitating accurate patterns.[4]

Herein lies the heart of the problem... "imitating accurate patterns." If we are to take a step off of the merry-go-round of sexist patterns creating sexist children who grow up to be sexist adults who create sexist patterns for <u>their</u> children, we must make a conscious and committed effort to eliminate negative patterns from our children's theatre productions.

This goal has several aspects; it is not limited to the performance of words in the script. As directors we must begin our process of selectivity the moment we consider a script for potential production. Many authorities on children's theatre warn their readers that not enough consideration is given to what the children's play script has to say. Charlotte Chorpenning, Jed Davis, Moses Goldberg, Orlin Corey, Nellie McCasslin, Gigore Pogonat, Marjorie Sigley, Geraldine Siks and Mary Jane Watkins all mention the importance of the story in respect to what is said or taught to the children, mainly through the phenomenon of identification.

Theatre is a powerful tool. Chorpenning, in her book, <u>Twenty-One Years With Children's Theatre</u>, relates how shocked

and humbled she was to discover that lines from her plays became "buried moments" and would surface years later in the conversation of the now-adult, ex-child audience member.[5] How much more careful we would be as directors and playwrights to examine each line and each activity described in the play before deciding on production if we would keep before us this vision of young minds recording and storing away every image that we present to them.

There are many criteria available for use as guidelines when examining scripts for negative human values. The Council on Interracial Books For Children Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Education has compiled a values checklist for children's books. This checklist covers: racism, sexism, elitism, materialism, individualism, ageism, conformism and escapism. It also reflects the level of literary and art quality, the authenticity of the culture represented, whether or not the book inspires action against repression and whether or not it builds positive or negative images of female/minorities.[6] These same guidelines may be applied to children's theatre scripts.

In Non-Sexist Childraising by Carrie Carmichael, another more specific sex stereotyping list is provided which deals mainly with the plot of the children's books. Carmichael's list includes the following: 1) number of male/female characters, 2) the roles of the male/female characters, 3) the number of male/female main characters, 4) the character traits of males/females, 5) the number of roles per male/female characters, 6) physical actions of male/female characters, and 7) what male/female characters say about girls/boys.

While all six of these criteria are important in evaluating a prospective script, several are especially relevant to live theatre. The second, roles of the characters, is one which must be looked at very carefully. Most children's plays contain an overabundance of male characters. Those few female characters which are included are often relegated to the roles of : waiting for a male, a nuturing supportive parent or sister, or the passive admirer of a male.

Although some authorities believe by the age of eight most children have decided on which jobs should be performed by which sex,[8] Selma Greenburg (Right From the Start; A Guide to Nonsexist Child Rearing) believes that

> by three children not only identify males and only males as appropriately doctors, mechanics, and television announcers and females and only females as teachers and nurses, but they also already expect that only boys will grow up to be doctors and mechanics and only girls will grow up to be teachers and nurses.[9]

Greenburg, however, also has confidence in the fact that even though these young people have made up their minds, "the process may be undone."[10] This is why we must be aware of which roles, in the broadest sense, the characters in the play represent.

The fourth item on Carmichael's list is : the character traits of males/females. In "Look Jane Look. See Sex Stereotypes" by Women on Words and Images, the issue of sexism in the portrayal of character traits is carefully examined and broken down into categories. Most of the positive character traits are usually associated with males and not with females. This list, which follows, may be used as a guide not only for the director and the

playwright, but also by those actors who portray the male and female characters. The list includes the categories of : Ingenuity, Cleverness, Creativity, Resourcefulness, Perserverance, Industry, Initiative, Strength, Bravery, Heroism, Routine Helpfulness, Elective Generativity, Apprenticeship, Acquision of Skills, Coming of Age, Earning, Trading, Aquisition, Competiveness, Use of Power, Exploration, Mobility, Imaginative Play, Adventure, Autonomy, Normal Assertiveness, Selfhood, Active Mastery, Friendship, Dependency, Pseudodependency, Passivity, Incompetence, Fearfulness, Docility, Victimizing and Humiliating the Opposite Sex, Excessive Aggression, Feeling and Expressing Emotion, Comedy and Humor, the Motivation Gap and Physical Appearance (manner of dress, neatness, etc.).[11] We would all do well to examine each prospective script and discover to which characters fall the balance of the "positive" or male characteristics and the "negative" or female characteristics.

These character traits are inexorably bound to Carmichael's item number six, physical actions of male/female characters. While it is possible for a director to add "positive" physical actions for the female characters without altering the tone of the play, it is the actions set out by the plot of the play which are often sexist by their very nature. According to Gloria Nemerowicz (Children's Perceptions of Gender and Work Roles) most young children believe that women are

> more limited biologically in the social roles they can play. The children's logic goes like this: Women are weak and fragile and they (the women) know it. This makes them avoid many activities for fear of hurting themselves.[12]

This concept of female physical weakness is a most serious one and is mentioned by several other authors.[13] This is one area where the director and actors can work together to add bits of staging which reinforce the concepts that there are physically strong females as well as males and there are physically weak males as well as females.

Carmichael's seventh area, what male/female charaters say about girls/boys, is one of the most important. This includes the use of language in all its aspects ... not only blatant allusions to stereotypes such as "Who wants to marry a woman who giggles all the time"(from THE MEN'S COTTAGE) and "Good little girls should be seen and not heard" (from THE RIDDLE MACHINE) but also to the use of pronouns, order of sex in lists (kings and queens, men and women, ladies and gentlemen), sex-implied words (mailman, mankind, governess, etc.) and sex-linked nouns (cats-she, dogs-he, car-she, horse-she ... many possesions are refered to as she.) This is another area where the director and actors may make slight changes in the script without altering the play to any extent. At this point it is important to state that most playwrights regard their work as sacred and the best and most honest course is to always check with the playwright or her or his agent before making changes in the script.

However non-sexist the language and dialogue may be, if the roles portrayed or the plot itself reflects a sexist attitude the child audience will believe what it sees rather than what it hears. Carmichael suggests one rule of thumb which could certainly be applied to the production of any children's play : "Could the same story be told with reversed sex roles?"[14] There are of

course practical limits to this rule (men cannot get pregnant) as well as logical ones. Directors must use common sense when and if they attempt such sex role reversals in a production. Children will not accept Charlina Brown though they may accept a female actor portraying the male character of Charlie Brown if done in a convincing manner.

It appears that many of the more recent, i.e. modern children's plays could be performed using sex role reversals. THE RIDDLE MACHINE by Beth Lambert is an excellent example. The playwright suggests alternating men and women in the authority figure role of the robot, however, the play would not suffer if the entire cast was sex-reversed. In fact, a more exciting production might very well be the result.

A phenomenon of the more recent children's plays is that of active as opposed to passive audience participation. Where children in Chorpenning's audiences merely moved in their seats, today's children respond by answering direct questions, moving in pantomime, climbing onstage and otherwise entering into the action of plays by people such as Brian Way, Moses Goldberg and Jack Stokes, to name a few. As directors we must not forget to look for sexism in the area of audience participation even though we may be tempted to believe that because these plays are modern, they must be alright.

In the participation play ALADDIN (Moses Goldberg) for example, the mother of a traveling family troupe begins to cry when she believes her children think she is ugly. The audience participation generated at this point consists of compliments. The audience members are asked to tell mama she "looks pretty"

and to think of as many compliments as they can. They are to "say it like you really mean it" in order to stop mama from crying and to influence her into performing a role in the play-within-a-play.[15] Needless to say, this is a blatant example of sexism which is re-inforced through the active participation of the children.

Directors and actors must also guard against asking for a "little girl" or a "little boy" in the audience to assist in participation when what is really needed is a child.

This is all very well, one might think, but what about adaptations of famous children's novels? How are we to maintain our integrity as non-sexists while giving our child audiences exposure to the classics? There is no easy answer. The time may very well come when Little Women and Huckleberry Finn are read mainly as historical novels. In the April 1980 issue of Language Arts[16] various writers respond to the query : Should we use children's classics that offer stereotypic images of sex roles? The answers presented seem to imply that we need the classics, not only for their possible mythic elements but as excellent aesthetic experiences. They may be learning tools through which children may gain an understanding of why things are the way they are today.

In relation to children's theatre adaptations we have a more complex responsibility to the child. There is an important difference between the adaptation of a time-tested fairy tale and the adaptation of a children's classic. Fairy tales have lasted because they serve a useful purpose in the growth and learning of human beings. In 1951 Dr. Krupper of the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Institute on "Fantasy and the Theatre Arts" reported

his belief that average fairy tales "enable a child to live out feelings without guilt."[17]

Fairy tales such as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" deal with mythic explanations for death, resurrection, the coming of winter and the birth of spring. If the message of the fairy tale is stll relevant and necessary for the well-being of our sub-conscious mind, or if it assists the child in the process of understanding the world, then we should continue to adapt the classic tales for use in children's theatre. What we can do is to follow the guidelines set down above. The director may choose a style for the production which is not a realistic one, thereby emphasizing the timelessness or the myhtic elements. (Perhaps this is one reason why ballet seems to thrive on the classic fairy tale.)

The adaptation of children's novels is quite another matter. What may appear as a timeless classic one decade may be quite out of place in another. There have been many adaptations of children's novels over the past sixty years. One such example is Sara Spencer's adaptation of Samuel Clemen's Tom Sawyer. While the adaptation does an excellent job of maintaining the story line, capturing the tone and quality of the characters and the mood of the novel, there are a few unnecessary additions such as Tom calling his brother Sid a "sissy."[18]

The play may be fun and exciting but it is not true to anti-sexist principles. Children may experience this classic through the original medium, reading, but how is it possible to justify the expense, time, and effort needed to mount such a production which violates so many of the criteria listed above? If we had a

choice, it would be better to allow children the experience of reading the book and instead bring them an adaptation which allows Becky to be physically active, intelligent, and interesting.*

If the director, designers, and actors feel many changes in the script are necessary in order to make it non-sexist, perhaps another play should be found. Jed Davis and Mary Jane Watkins offer sound advice when they suggest, "It is better to discard the total work than to destroy its strength by making radical alterations."[19] Which is, of course, one more way of saying that we need more children's theatre scripts which demonstrate positive human values for those of all sexes, races, religions, economic classes and national origins. These, as yet unwritten plays, should not extol the virtues of the female sex at the expense of other groups. The Council on Interracial Books for Children urges the need for more feminist books about boys.[20] Many feminist writers also mention the need for non-sexist treatment of boys. This is one of the areas that is so easy to overlook. While our collective consciousness may have been raised in the area of female focused sexism, we are often blind to sexism when it comes to the roles of boys. If we are to alter the patterns of the future we must definitely attempt to reach those who form the power base in today's society ... the males.

The entire process of creating non-sexist children's theatre

* For a discussion of the negative aspects of children's theatre when used exclusively as a pedagogical tool see : Mary Jane Evans, "Theatre For Children : Art Form or Anarchy?" in Theatre For Young Audiences.

production is complex and requires a determined group effort. As Orlin Corey says, "Stereotypes result from second hand knowledge and making do with leftover impressions of other people's work."[21]

The director is the person who has the responsibility to keep the goal of a non-sexist production alive during all phases of the theatre process, from conversations with and expectations of production sraff members, to the personal communication between actors at rehearsal and performance. If the director does not have a non-sexist production as one of her or his final goals, there is only a slim chance that it will be one. Of course, as in any art form, we must remember that good art is the final desired product : an art product that not only entertains, demonstrates positive identification models, and educates, but also provides an aesthetic experience for the young audience members. When we can provide this excellent children's theatre we will have helped to eliminate static role models and taken another positive step towards the future humanization of all young people.

Endnotes

[1] Moses Goldberg, Children's Theatre; A Philosophy And A Method (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), p.3.

[2] Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, Cultural Conformity In Books For Children (Metuchen, N.J. : The Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 166.

[3] Campton Bell, "The Psychology of The Child Audience," World Theatre, Vol. II, numero 3 (1952), p. 28.

[4] Bell, p. 28.

[5] Charlotte Chorpenning, Twenty-One Years With Children's Theatre (Anchorage, Kentucky: The Children's Theatre Press, 1954), p.23.

[6] CIBC Racism and Sexism, Human (and anti-human) Values In Children's Books (N.Y. Resource Center for Education, 1976).

[7] Carrie Carmichael, Non-Sexist Childraising (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), p.124.

[8] Women on Words and Images, "Look Jane Look. See Sex Stereotypes," in And Jill Came Tumbling After: Sexism in American Education, eds. Judith Stacey, Susan Bereaud and Joan Daniels (N.Y.: Laurel, 1974), p. 174.

[9] Selma Greenberg, Right From the Start; A Guide to Nonsexist Child Rearing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), p. 42.

[10] Greenberg, p. 54.

[11] Women on Words and Images, p. 161-171.

[12] Gloria Morris Nemerowicz, Children's Perceptions of Gender and Work Roles (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), p. 158.

[13] Greenberg and Carmichael.

[14] Carmichael, p. 130.

[15] Moses Goldberg, ALLADIN: A PARTICIPATION PLAY (New Orleans: Anchorage Press, Inc., 1977).

[16] Patricia J. Cianciolo, "Queries; Should we use children's classics that offer stereotypic images of sex roles?" Language Arts, Vol. 57, No. 4, April 1980, p. 450.

[17] Bell, p. 27.

[18] Sara Spencer, TOM SAWYER, in Twenty Plays For Young People (Anchorage, Kentucky: The Anchorage Press, 1967), p. 49.

[19] Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Larson Watkins, Children's Theatre (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 62-63.

[20] CIBC Racism and Sexism, p. 267.

[21] Orlin Corey, "Go, Make Ready; A Philosophy of Making Theatre For Children," in Theatre For Young Audiences, ed. Nellie McCaslin, (N.Y.: Longman, Inc., 1978), p. 98.

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